

The Bob Burden by **hoppingmad**

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Summary:

Hopper helps soothe Joyce's anxieties.

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Authors Note: I have been doing a rewatch and I see how often Joyce makes faces around Bob. I know in my heart she was never in love with him but I also know she desperately wanted to be.

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This is set not long after El closes the gate.

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Joyce lit her cigarette with shaking hands and checked her watch once more. Hopper was late, not that this surprised her... but the longer he took to arrive the more she questioned her decision. She had let Hopper convince her to go shopping two towns over. He needed to get some actual clothes for El, and there was no way they could do that in Hawkin's without raised eyebrows – the small town was full of gossips and both Joyce and Hopper were regular names thrown into the rumour mill as it was.

This was the first time, apart from work, that she had been away from her son. She would be over an hour's drive away with no way to contact him – and though she trusted Jonathan implicitly, she still had a lot of anxious energy she just could not rid herself of. Twice the night before she had dialed Hopper's number, ready to cancel their shopping trip, but hung up before he answered.

Though, on the other hand she had to admit that shopping for El would bring her great pleasure. She was certainly chuffed that Hopper trusted her enough to be the one picking his daughter's clothes. She remembered many years ago being in a mom and baby coffee group – when she had Will – and being envious of the mom's shopping for their little girls. There was far more to choose from and there was just something special about buying a pretty dress. Not that she would change Jonathan or Will for the world, she loved her boys to bits...

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She tried to contain her nerves and excitement but ended up fidgeting in the passenger seat of Hop's truck. They had only been driving thirty minutes and already she was exhausted. Anxiety was more exhausting than anything she could think of.

"Jesus, would you stop already? You are making *me* anxious." Hopper sounded gruff, but she knew him well enough to know he was worried. She saw the way his brows furrowed slightly.

"Sorry," she took a deep breath and did her best to stay still. She focused on her toes, and then travelled up her body trying to loosen each muscle at a time. *Will is safe. El is safe. Jonathan is safe. You are fine. Just breathe.* Eventually Hopper broke the silence, and she was at first pleased for the distraction.

"I just... wondered how you were doing, at home? I've not been able to visit since El, I know there would have been a big clean-up to do. I'm sorry I didn't help."

"Oh, between Jonathan, Nancy and the kids we got things in working-order, the house was already in disrepair anyway." She shrugged. "We will be okay."

"I know you will, you're tough." She snorted quietly. Tough? Yeah, right.

"Oh yes, Crazy Joyce - the quivering mouse is tough." She rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, Hopper." He looked over at her in surprise.

"You don't think you are strong?"

"Uh no... I'm neurotic, the crazy mama bear who just won't let her boys two steps from her."

"No-one blames you." He told her sternly. "Anyone in your position would be over-protective of their son."

"No-one knows the real story. I hear the things they say about me Hopper, I have no illusions. It's been happening since Lonnie, I'll never fit into this town fully."

"You are *right* they don't know the whole story. They also don't know the real you."

"It's funny," she mused. "Bob loved me, he felt as though he had hit the jackpot dating me. He once told me how much it meant to him that I had chosen him, when at school I was just so much cooler than him." She chuckled, using air quotation marks for the word *cooler*. "It's as if he were blinded, because to be honest, I'm not the Joyce I used to be." Her heart ached thinking of Bob, poor Bob. He had been so good for her family, and in the end, he had been a hero.

"I'm sorry about Bob," he reached over and placed a hand over hers, his large hand covering her trembling hand completely. "I know that..." he trailed off, unable to say the next words.

She guessed he knew as well as she did that she had never been *in love* with Bob Newby. She had loved him, she had *wanted* to be *in love* with him - but when it came down to it...

She felt her eyes filling with tears and she yanked her hand back into her lap, irrationally angry with him.

She was the one who had said Bob's name first anyway. She knew it wasn't Hopper's fault that she felt so awful about the whole situation. It wasn't *his* fault she was actually just a bitch. Because she was, wasn't she?

"Shit, Joyce." She felt the car pull over and the tears began to fall in earnest, she felt a sob rise to her throat. "Shit," he repeated. "I'm sorry, I should have just kept my mouth shut."

"It's okay," she mumbled. "It's me who should be sorry."

"C'mere." He reached over an arm and tucked her against him, her body leaning awkwardly over the gear stick. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I wasn't in love with him," she hiccupped, and turned her face against his chest.

"But you loved him, and you loved the stability he gave your family." She sobbed quietly into his chest. It was so *wrong* of her to use him in

that way.

"I used him," she wasn't even sure he could make out her words anymore due to the crying, but she felt she had to explain herself, so she took a deep breath. "I wanted to be in love with him so badly. I wanted someone to lean on, someone to love my boys and give us some normality." She took another breath, trying hard to reign in her tears. "I wanted to be wanted, needed by someone."

"Oh Joyce, you didn't do anything wrong. You were dating him, not married to him." She raised her eyes to meet his and found him staring intently at her, she could tell he was being honest. "You and Bob had an amazing few months together, you made each other very happy. Right?"

"Yes," she mumbled.

"And you miss him?" She felt her heart throb.

"More than anything."

"Then there is nothing wrong with the way you are feeling."

She cried then, really cried and sobbed and made an absolute mess of Hopper's shirt. She wasn't sure how, but Hopper had helped relieve some of the burden she had been carrying around. She called it the Bob Burden in her mind. Hopper had made her feel like she could one day accept the death of Bob, and perhaps even carry on without that guilt hanging over her head.

After a good cry and releasing some of that pain and guilt she had been holding onto – she discovered that her anxiety over Will had eased too. She looked up at Hopper in wonder. How did he manage to say the right things, so often? He certainly hadn't ever been the most eloquent man in the past – but somehow in the past two years more often than not he was the one who had helped her out of a dark place.

"Hop,"

"Yeah?"

“Thank you for you know... being you.” She shifted slightly out of his arms, but before returning to her seat she kissed his cheek. “Now, let’s go shopping.”

The End.